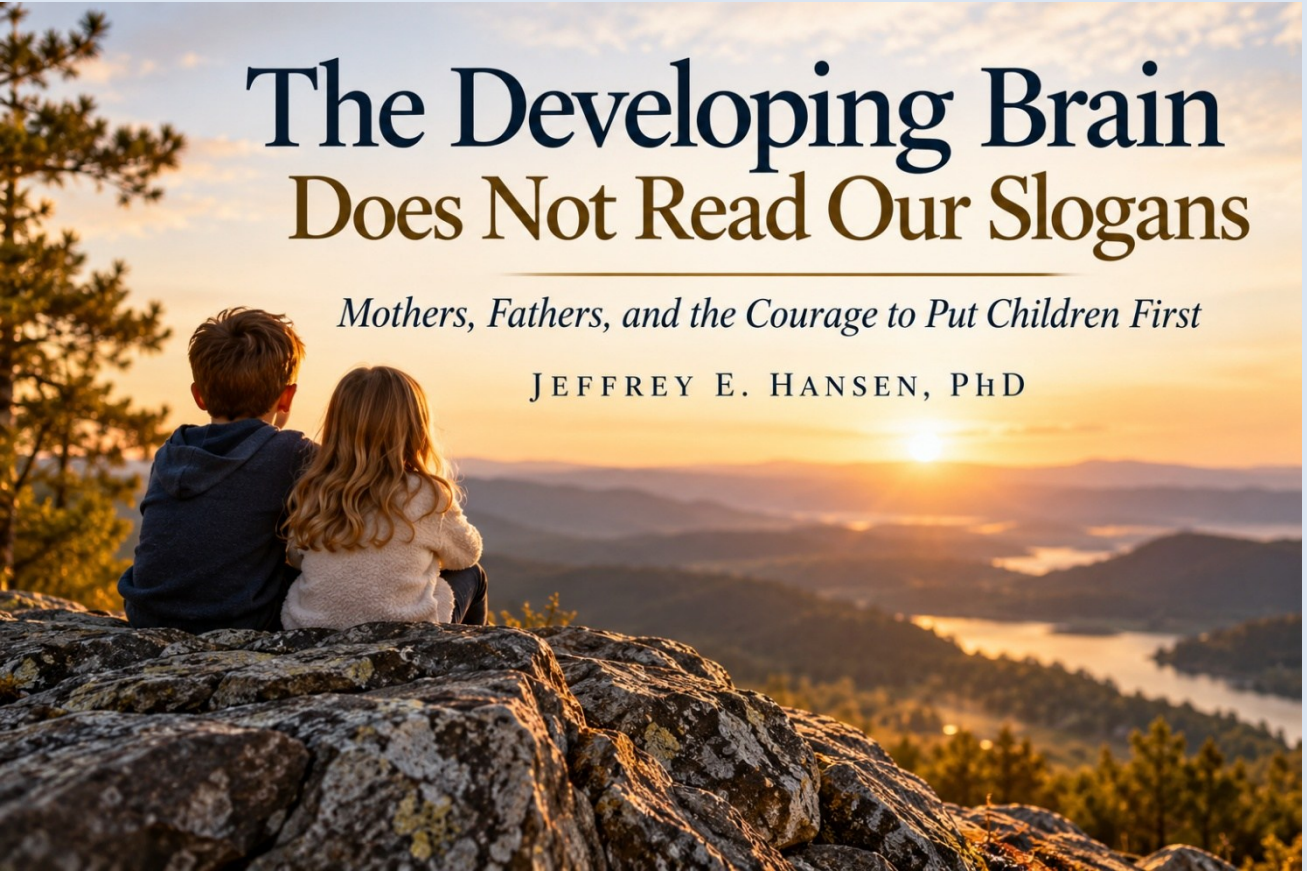




# The Developing Brain Does Not Read Our Slogans

*Mothers, Fathers, and the Courage to Put Children First*

JEFFREY E. HANSEN, PhD

## The Child Does Not Get a Vote

To you young mothers and fathers: I know you are tired. You are juggling work, bills, sleep deprivation, and a phone that seems determined to swallow every unclaimed moment. Now here comes an old psychologist telling you that your presence matters enormously. Just what you needed, another thing to worry about! But please stay with me. I am not demanding perfect parenting. I want to show you the extraordinary influence you already possess.

A newborn does not arrive with a political philosophy. A toddler does not care what adults have declared fashionable, outdated, or offensive. Children arrive with developing brains, vulnerable nervous systems, and an extraordinary need for relationships that teach them how to live in the world.

I have spent much of my professional life working with children, families, and the long aftermath of disrupted attachment and trauma. One conviction has only deepened: children need more than affection in the abstract. They need sustained, responsive relationships that teach their bodies and minds how to feel safe, recover from distress, tolerate frustration, and move into the world with courage. And mothers and fathers often contribute to that education in wonderfully complementary ways.

And to the judges, legislators, and professionals who decide what family life ought to look like: before we declare any relationship dispensable, perhaps we should consult the developing child. The child does not get a vote. That should make the rest of us more humble, not more confident.

I am reminded of Jesus' teaching in Matthew 7:24–27 about two men who built their houses. One built upon solid rock; the other upon sand. When the rains came, the winds blew, and the storms battered those houses, only the one built upon rock remained standing. What a magnificent picture of resilience! And what a profound reminder of our responsibility to children. We cannot promise them a life without storms. The storms will come. Heartbreak will come. Disappointment, adversity, and suffering will come. Our task as parents, clinicians, and policymakers is not to shelter children from every storm but to help them build a foundation strong enough to withstand one.

And that foundation is not poured in concrete. It is built in relationship, through thousands of seemingly ordinary moments of love, safety, attunement, encouragement, and repair. Long before children can understand a sermon about building upon the rock, their developing brains and nervous systems are already learning what it means to stand on solid ground.

The question before us is whether we are helping our children build upon rock, or leaving them to discover, when the storms arrive, that we have built their foundations upon sand.

### **A Quiet Scholar and a Remarkable Discovery**

I have had the pleasure of hearing Allan Schore lecture many times over the years, and I have always found him fascinating. Now, Allan is hardly what you would call a theatrical speaker. He generally sits, presents his slides, and quietly walks his audience through decades of research. No dramatic gestures, no inspirational music, and certainly no smoke machines! Yet I have often found myself captivated, because what he is describing is nothing less than the extraordinary process through which a little human being begins to develop a sense of safety, connection, emotional stability, and ultimately a sense of self.

Beginning with his landmark work *Affect Regulation and the Origin of the Self* (1994), Schore helped bring attachment theory, developmental neuroscience, and clinical psychology into a remarkably rich conversation. His contributions have helped us appreciate that early relationships are not simply comforting emotional experiences. They are deeply involved in the developing systems through which children learn to experience and regulate emotion, respond to stress, and engage with the world around them.

And here is what I find so remarkable about his work. Some of the most consequential experiences in human development occur long before a child can understand language, much less explain what is happening inside. A mother's smile, the melody of her voice, the warmth of her touch, and the timing of her responses are all part of a wonderfully intricate biological conversation. The infant responds through facial expressions, movement, vocalizations, and changes in arousal. Through thousands of these exchanges, the developing nervous system begins learning something profoundly important: what it feels like to be safe, to be connected, and to find comfort when the world becomes overwhelming.

Schore (1994, 2003) has devoted much of his professional life to understanding the neurobiology of these early, largely nonverbal exchanges. His work also helps explain why

disruptions in early relationships can have such lasting consequences, and why healing from trauma often requires more than simply talking about what happened. Our earliest relational experiences are not merely stored as stories we can recall. They also contribute to patterns of emotional and physiological responding that may remain with us long after childhood.

But there is something wonderfully hopeful here as well. If relationships can shape the developing nervous system, then loving, responsive relationships can also help nurture the foundations of resilience. And that brings us to one of the most beautiful aspects of developmental neuroscience: the remarkable interplay of emotion, biology, and human connection that begins in the earliest moments of life.

### **The Beautiful Dance of Mothers, Fathers, and the Developing Brain**

There is something almost miraculous happening when a mother gazes into her baby's eyes and that little face suddenly lights up. Mom smiles, the baby wiggles with delight, and an extraordinary biological conversation begins. No words. No instructions. No parenting manual required. Just two human beings finding one another in a dance of connection that is helping shape a developing brain.

Allan Schore (1994, 2001, 2003) helps us appreciate just how remarkable this seemingly ordinary exchange really is. Those moments of shared delight engage reward-related processes involving dopamine, a neurotransmitter associated with motivation, pleasure, and engagement. As the infant matures, serotonin-related processes also participate in the developing capacity to modulate arousal and emotional responses. Oxytocin contributes to the complicated biology of bonding and social connection.

Now, I realize that no mother gazing lovingly at her infant is thinking, *Well, there goes another magnificent burst of dopaminergic activity!* Thank goodness. But underneath that beautiful exchange, biology is doing some remarkable work.

And here is the really important part. Children must learn not only how to experience joy and excitement but also how to come back down when those feelings become overwhelming. They need to learn that distress is survivable, that excitement can be managed, and that someone will help them find their footing when their little world gets turned upside down.

That, my friends, is the beginning of resilience.

And fathers? Oh, fathers belong in this remarkable biological story, too. Not as substitute mothers, not as occasional visitors, and certainly not as the fellow who shows up later to teach the child how to throw a baseball. Fathers can be deeply involved in nurturing and soothing their infants from the very beginning. But as children grow, many fathers also bring something wonderfully different to the developmental dance: a particular enthusiasm for physical play, exploration, challenge, and the occasional carefully supervised adventure that makes Mom wonder whether she should have married a slightly less adventurous man.

Picture Dad on the living-room floor with his toddler. There is laughter, wrestling, chasing, squealing, and perhaps a flying leap onto Dad's stomach that he will regret for the next several hours. The excitement builds. Then the play gets a little too rough. Dad slows things down, sets a boundary, and helps the child settle.

Something much more important than entertainment has just occurred.

That child has experienced excitement without danger, strength without cruelty, and boundaries without rejection. The child is discovering that big feelings do not have to become destructive behaviors. And perhaps most importantly, the child is learning that the world can be explored with courage because someone trustworthy is nearby.

Developmental psychologist Daniel Paquette (2004) described this as the father–child activation relationship, emphasizing the role of stimulating play, manageable risk, exploration, and protective limits. I love that concept. Children need someone who helps them feel safe enough to rest, but they also need someone who helps them feel brave enough to venture beyond what is familiar.

And here is where the research becomes especially compelling.

Grossmann and colleagues (2002) followed 44 families over 16 years, examining how early relationships predicted later attachment representations. Their findings suggested that fathers' sensitive and challenging play contributed meaningfully to children's developing representations of attachment, while early mother–infant attachment also carried predictive significance.

Think about that for a moment.

We have spent decades appropriately emphasizing the importance of comforting a distressed infant. But what if we have not paid nearly enough attention to the developmental significance of the parent who encourages that same child to climb a little higher, take a manageable risk, try again after falling, and discover that fear need not have the final word?

What if the child needs both the reassurance of a safe harbor and the encouragement to sail beyond it? Now, Grossmann's study was relatively small, and it does not establish that only mothers can provide one experience or only fathers the other. But it raises an important developmental question: Have we sometimes been so focused on how children seek comfort that we have overlooked how they develop courage?

And I would take that question one step further. Have we become so determined to emphasize the interchangeability of parental roles that we have grown reluctant to explore what may be genuinely distinctive about maternal and paternal relationships?

I find that possibility troubling.

This is not an argument that mothers cannot wrestle with their children or that fathers cannot tenderly soothe a frightened infant. Of course they can! Nor is it an invitation to resurrect some cartoonish division of parental labor in which Mom dispenses hugs while Dad dispenses footballs.

But acknowledging that mothers and fathers are both capable caregivers does not require us to assume that their developmental contributions are necessarily identical. Indeed, Abraham and colleagues (2014) demonstrated that the neural systems involved in caregiving are influenced by actual caregiving experience across mothers and fathers. That is a fascinating finding because it reminds us that the developing relationship is not simply dictated by biology. It is shaped through participation, responsiveness, and the repeated experience of being there.

And that brings us to something I wish every young parent could understand. Your child is not merely watching you. Your child is being shaped through relationship with you. When you comfort, encourage, laugh, play, set limits, and repair the inevitable misunderstandings, you are participating in the construction of that child's emotional world. You are helping establish expectations about safety, trust, courage, restraint, and love.

And when mothers and fathers bring their own personalities, experiences, strengths, and ways of engaging into that relationship, children may encounter a wonderfully rich range of experiences through which to grow. We should be studying that richness with curiosity, not dismissing the possibility of meaningful differences because the questions make us uncomfortable.

Because somewhere between a mother's tender embrace and a father's delighted encouragement to try one more time, a child may be discovering two of life's most important truths:

*I am safe enough to be loved.*

*And I am strong enough to face the world.*

What a magnificent foundation upon which to build a life.

### **Dear Parents, Your Presence Is More Powerful Than You Know**

To you mothers and fathers, especially those of you raising young children, I want to offer something of a heartfelt plea. And before I do, let me acknowledge something important: I know most of you are doing the very best you can. Parenting is exhausting, demanding, sometimes bewildering, and often thankless work. You are balancing careers, financial pressures, household responsibilities, relationships, and a world that seems determined to demand your attention every waking moment. And somewhere in the middle of all that, you are trying to raise a little human being into a healthy, resilient adult. No small assignment!

So please hear what follows not as criticism, but as encouragement from an old psychologist who has spent a lifetime studying what helps children flourish and what leaves them struggling.

I want to talk about something that has quietly worked its way into nearly every corner of our lives: that little glowing device we carry everywhere.

Now, I am not suggesting you throw your smartphone into the nearest lake, cancel your internet service, and move your family into a cave. Good heavens, I enjoy modern technology as much as anyone. But I do wonder whether, without quite realizing it, we have allowed these remarkable devices to steal some of the most precious moments we have with our children.

Think about the little boy who comes running into the room, bursting with excitement to tell Dad about something he discovered. Or the little girl who looks up at Mom, hoping to catch her eye and share a moment of delight. These are small moments, easily missed. But through the lens of developmental neuroscience, they are anything but small.

Stephen Porges (2011), through his polyvagal framework, has emphasized the importance of autonomic regulation and the social cues through which human beings experience safety. Daniel Siegel's (2012) work in interpersonal neurobiology similarly explores how relationships contribute to emotional integration and regulation. Although aspects of these theoretical models remain subjects of scientific debate, they draw our attention to something profoundly important: children are influenced not only by what we say and do, but also by the emotional state we bring into their presence.

A mother who is overwhelmed, anxious, or emotionally distracted may find it harder to offer the calm, responsive engagement her infant needs. The same is true of fathers. Conversely, when we slow ourselves down, soften our voices, offer a warm expression, and become genuinely available, we help create the conditions in which our children's nervous systems can begin to settle and feel secure.

And here is something I find particularly moving. Long before a child can understand the words *I love you*, that child is already experiencing love through the rhythm of your voice, the warmth of your touch, the expression on your face, and the consistency of your presence.

So, dear mothers and fathers, here is my simple invitation: put down the phone. Not forever, of course! But when that little face turns toward you, when those eyes search for yours, when your child comes running with some wonderful discovery that simply cannot wait, give them the gift of your undivided attention. Look into those eyes. Smile. Listen. Delight in them. You may think you are doing something rather ordinary, but in those precious moments, you are helping shape a developing nervous system and teaching a child something that no smartphone, television, or sophisticated parenting program can ever replace: *I see you. I delight in you. You matter to me.* And someday, when the storms of life arrive, those seemingly ordinary moments may prove to have been anything but ordinary.

### **Fathers Matter. Perhaps More Than We Have Been Willing to Admit.**

In a particularly important review, Sarkadi and colleagues (2008) examined 24 longitudinal publications addressing father involvement and child development. Twenty-two reported

positive associations with developmental outcomes, with direct engagement emerging as the most consistently supported dimension of father involvement. Now, think about that for a moment. These were not sentimental Father's Day greeting cards or nostalgic reflections about the good old days. These were longitudinal studies examining how fathers and father figures influence children's development over time. And the findings ought to get our attention.

The message is both encouraging and consequential. Children benefit when fathers are meaningfully engaged in their lives, not merely when fathers are technically present or their names appear on birth certificates, but when they participate in the wonderful, messy, demanding business of raising children. The research does not establish one perfect form of fatherhood, nor does it suggest that every child without an involved father is destined to struggle. But surely we can acknowledge something important without turning it into another cultural battlefield: fathers are not incidental to the developmental lives of their children.

And to the fathers reading this, I want to speak directly to you for a moment. I suspect many of you wonder from time to time whether what you do really matters. Perhaps you are working long hours, trying to provide for your family, and wondering whether you have enough left in the tank at the end of the day to be the father you hoped to become. Perhaps you are navigating a difficult marriage, a divorce, or a custody arrangement that leaves you feeling more like a visitor than a parent. Or perhaps you simply wonder whether your children notice all those little things you do that seem to go unrecognized.

I want to assure you that those ordinary moments matter enormously. The bedtime conversation, the encouragement after a disappointing day, the gentle correction when behavior crosses a line, the ridiculous joke that makes everyone groan, and the quiet reassurance that says, without words, *I am here, and you can count on me*. These are not insignificant moments squeezed between the supposedly important events of life. In many ways, they are the important events. They help shape how children understand trust, security, responsibility, courage, and love. You do not have to be a superhero, have all the answers, or compete with Mom for some imaginary parenting trophy. You simply need to keep showing up, imperfectly perhaps, but faithfully.

And mothers, I hope you hear this as an affirmation of something many of you already understand. When a loving, responsible father is meaningfully involved, he is not taking something away from your relationship with your child. He is adding another source of affection, security, encouragement, and strength. Motherhood and fatherhood need not be competing enterprises. At their best, they are complementary relationships that can enrich a child's developmental world in ways we are still working to understand.

This brings me to a more uncomfortable subject, one that has troubled me for many years as a psychologist who has worked with children and families. I have seen how fathers can become marginalized in the aftermath of divorce and custody disputes, particularly when their children are very young. Sometimes the assumption seems to be that mothers are developmentally indispensable while fathers, however loving and capable, are somehow supplementary. I find

that assumption deeply troubling, especially given what we know about attachment, paternal involvement, and the importance of sustained relationships in early development.

This concern is hardly mine alone. In a thoughtful discussion published in *Family Court Review*, Schore and McIntosh (2011) examined what attachment neuroscience might contribute to family law and custody decisions. Their central message deserves our attention: young children are not simply miniature adults who can accommodate whatever arrangements the legal system finds convenient. Their rapidly developing brains are profoundly sensitive to the quality, consistency, and timing of their earliest relationships. Schore emphasized that decisions affecting infants and toddlers must account for their developmental stage, their established attachment relationships, and the emotional consequences of separation and disruption. What a powerful reminder that custody decisions should begin not with competing parental claims, but with a careful understanding of the developing child.

To the judges, attorneys, custody evaluators, and policymakers who make decisions affecting these families, I would offer a respectful but earnest challenge. When a father is loving, capable, actively involved, and safe, why would we treat his relationship with his child as something that can be reduced to occasional visitation without serious consideration of the developmental consequences? And the same concern applies when a mother's relationship is unfairly diminished. Children are not prizes to be awarded in an adult dispute, nor are parents interchangeable names on a visitation calendar. They are deeply significant attachment figures whose presence, consistency, and responsiveness may shape a child's developing sense of security.

Of course, family circumstances differ enormously. Some parents are unsafe, some relationships are marked by violence or neglect, and some family situations require careful protections. Every custody decision deserves individualized consideration of the child's safety and well-being. But those realities should not become a justification for treating a healthy parental relationship as expendable. A child's developing nervous system does not understand legal strategy, competing affidavits, or the administrative convenience of a custody schedule. It experiences presence and absence, connection and separation, predictability and uncertainty. And I cannot help wondering whether, in our efforts to resolve adult disputes, we sometimes lose sight of the little person whose emotional world is being rearranged.

Finally, to those who shape public policy, I would ask that we resist an increasingly tempting intellectual shortcut. Recognizing that families come in many forms does not require us to conclude that mothers and fathers make no potentially distinctive contributions to child development. Those are two very different propositions. If developmental science reveals meaningful patterns in maternal and paternal relationships, we ought to examine them carefully rather than dismiss them because the findings may complicate our cultural preferences. At the same time, we should be willing to follow the evidence wherever it leads, including when it challenges our own assumptions.

This is not an exercise in nostalgia for the 1950s, nor is it a suggestion that every traditional household is healthy or every nontraditional household deficient. It is an appeal to take seriously the complexity of human development and the extraordinary significance of parental relationships. Above all, it is an appeal to remember that behind every statistic, every custody ruling, and every public policy debate is a child who deserves the benefit of every healthy, loving relationship we can help preserve.

### **Same-Sex Parenting: A Question Worth Asking**

Now, let us venture briefly into territory where some of my colleagues might prefer that I put down my pen and find a less controversial hobby. Perhaps gardening, although I suspect I could find something controversial to say about the tomatoes!

Before proceeding, I want to make something clear. My Christian faith informs my understanding of marriage and family, and I do not pretend otherwise. But those convictions do not give me license to disrespect people who see these matters differently. I have no desire to disparage gay men or women, question the sincerity of their love for their children, or tell other adults how they must live. I recognize their legal rights and respect their dignity. Same-sex couples can be deeply loving, devoted parents, and their children can flourish.

Indeed, same-sex couples deserve access to the very best developmental science, just as heterosexual couples do. They deserve to know what research reveals, what remains uncertain, and what questions are still worth asking. Respecting families and pursuing difficult scientific questions are not competing obligations.

Which brings me to a question arising naturally from our discussion of mothers and fathers. If maternal and paternal relationships sometimes provide distinctive developmental experiences, what might that mean for children raised by two mothers or two fathers? Can different relational pathways produce equally healthy outcomes? These are legitimate developmental questions, not accusations against loving parents.

The research is interesting, although hardly uniform. Allen (2013), analyzing Canadian census data, reported lower high-school graduation rates among children living in same-sex households compared with those living with married different-sex parents. Sullins (2015), examining American survey data, reported differences in children's emotional outcomes. In a subsequent methodological commentary, Sullins (2017) raised concerns about sample classification errors in another study of same-sex parenting and child health. These findings and critiques deserve consideration, although questions involving family transitions, biological parentage, household classification, and the difficulty of separating association from causation complicate their interpretation. We should examine those limitations carefully, just as we should examine the limitations of studies reporting more favorable findings.

Importantly, substantial research has also reported favorable or broadly comparable outcomes for children raised by same-sex parents. Zhang and colleagues (2023), for example, contributed to this literature through a systematic review and meta-analysis. These findings deserve

recognition. Loving, stable, responsive parenting is not exclusive to any particular family structure, and we should welcome evidence that children are flourishing.

But one frequently cited study deserves closer scrutiny, particularly when its findings are used to support sweeping developmental conclusions.

Mazrekaj and colleagues (2020), publishing in the *American Sociological Review*, examined educational outcomes among children raised by same-sex and different-sex couples in the Netherlands. Using an impressive longitudinal administrative dataset, they found favorable academic outcomes among children raised by same-sex parents from birth. Their methodology offered important advantages, particularly in distinguishing children raised in these households from birth from those who entered them following earlier family transitions.

That is meaningful research. But before declaring a sweeping developmental victory, we should ask a fundamental question: What did the investigators actually measure?

### **Educational achievement.**

They did not directly measure attachment security, autonomic regulation, emotional resilience, parent–infant attunement, or the potentially distinctive developmental contributions of mothers and fathers. A child can excel academically while struggling emotionally, just as a child can struggle academically while possessing remarkable psychological resilience. A report card tells us something important about educational achievement, but it cannot tell us everything about the architecture of a child's emotional world.

There is another significant limitation. Of the 2,971 children identified as living with same-sex parents, 2,786 lived with two mothers, while only 185 lived with two fathers. Approximately 94 percent of the same-sex-parent sample involved female couples. Moreover, the more focused analysis of children raised by same-sex parents from birth involved 1,390 children. The researchers themselves acknowledged that the number of children raised by two fathers was too small to support strong conclusions about differences between male and female same-sex couples.

That matters enormously when our question concerns the distinctive developmental contributions of mothers and fathers. A study overwhelmingly representing children raised by two mothers cannot reasonably be presented as having settled questions about children raised by two fathers.

Socioeconomic differences also deserve attention. Same-sex parents in this Dutch sample tended to be older, better educated, and more financially advantaged. These characteristics are relevant to academic achievement. Adjusting for such differences reduced part of the observed academic advantage, although a positive association remained. The researchers employed additional statistical methods to address selection bias, but no observational study can eliminate every possible influence of unmeasured family characteristics.

None of these limitations invalidates the study. They define what the study can, and cannot, tell us.

Mazrekaj and colleagues provided meaningful evidence that children raised by same-sex parents can perform exceptionally well academically. That is encouraging. But their findings do not establish that maternal and paternal relationships are developmentally interchangeable. Neither do the study's limitations establish that children raised by same-sex parents are disadvantaged. Both conclusions would exceed the evidence.

What we need is continued longitudinal research examining attachment, emotional attunement, challenging play, exploration, identity development, and resilience, with adequate representation of children raised by two fathers as well as two mothers. Perhaps children can arrive at equally healthy outcomes through different relational pathways. Perhaps maternal and paternal relationships sometimes offer distinctive experiences that matter developmentally. Those possibilities deserve investigation, not premature dismissal.

I would hope we could pursue these questions without turning loving families into political battlegrounds. Acknowledging possible differences is not the same as declaring anyone deficient, and respecting families does not require abandoning scientific curiosity. We should be able to disagree respectfully, investigate carefully, and remain open to findings that challenge our expectations.

Same-sex parents deserve that kind of science. So do heterosexual parents. Most importantly, children deserve it.

Because ultimately, this is not about proving that one group of adults has won an argument. It is about understanding what children need to flourish.

**The developing brain deserves a more complete conversation than that.**

## **The Child's Timetable Is Not Our Political Timetable**

Schore's (2017) *All Our Sons* adds a further challenge: his review proposes that sex-related differences in early maturation may leave boys vulnerable to environmental stress for longer. This concerns the developing child, rather than a comparison of family arrangements. It presses us to ask whether the same environment makes different demands on children at different stages. A developmental account that ignores timing may miss the very process it hopes to explain.

And the scrutiny must not stop at same-sex parenting. Divorce, parental absence, chronic conflict, pornography, early exposure to adult sexual material, and the ways we rearrange childhood around adult convenience all deserve serious developmental examination. My allegiance here is to the child, not to making any category of adult feel vindicated.

We are remarkably good at designing interventions for anxiety, aggression, and dysregulation after patterns become entrenched. Prevention is quieter. It looks like a parent taking a breath

before responding. It looks like a mother who remains emotionally available. It looks like a father who stays engaged after divorce. It looks like adults refusing to make a child carry the weight of their bitterness.

I am not saying every mother–father home is safe, or that every other household is deficient. Some children need protection from a parent; others flourish because loving adults step into painful gaps. Single parents, grandparents, adoptive parents, foster parents, and same-sex parents often perform acts of extraordinary devotion. They deserve encouragement rather than easy judgments. And none of that makes the study of mothers and fathers irrelevant.

### **Building on the Rock: What We Owe Our Children**

As I bring these reflections to a close, I want to return to something deeply personal. My Christian faith has profoundly shaped how I understand marriage, motherhood, fatherhood, and the sacred responsibility of raising children. I make no apology for those convictions, nor do I expect everyone reading this essay to share them. But I am also a clinical psychologist, and I believe deeply in the importance of scientific inquiry. Faith and science need not be adversaries, and neither should become an excuse for intellectual arrogance. My responsibility is to follow the evidence as faithfully as I can, to acknowledge what we know and what remains uncertain, and to remain willing to learn. After more than four decades in this profession, I hope I am still capable of being surprised.

And perhaps that is one of the things I most want to communicate throughout this essay: we ought to approach the extraordinary responsibility of raising children with a little more humility, a great deal more compassion, and a renewed appreciation for the importance of mothers and fathers. We do not have to agree about every cultural or political question to recognize that children need loving, attentive, emotionally available adults who are committed to their well-being.

And let us be clear about something. Mothers matter. Fathers matter. Not simply as interchangeable adults who perform a collection of parenting tasks, but as human beings whose relationships with their children can offer distinctive and deeply meaningful developmental experiences. We should not be embarrassed to say so, reluctant to investigate those differences, or willing to diminish either parent because doing so happens to fit a fashionable cultural narrative. Our children deserve better than that. They deserve our best science, our deepest compassion, and our unwavering commitment to the relationships that help them flourish.

To the mother reading this after another sleepless night, wondering whether you are doing enough, I hope you recognize how much your ordinary acts of love and care matter. To the father who sometimes wonders whether his presence is truly important, I hope you will never underestimate the influence you can have through your affection, encouragement, steadiness, and faithful involvement. And to the single parent who is carrying responsibilities that were never meant to feel quite so heavy, I hope you know that your sacrifices and perseverance deserve our deepest respect. There is no such thing as a perfect family, and I have certainly

never encountered a perfect parent, myself included. What I have encountered are countless mothers and fathers who love their children dearly, sometimes stumble along the way, and keep getting up to try again. There is something wonderfully honorable about that.

I also want to offer a gentle appeal to my colleagues in psychology, to educators, judges, legislators, and others whose decisions shape the lives of families. Behind our research findings, diagnostic categories, custody arrangements, and policy debates are real children whose emotional worlds are being formed every day. These are not abstract social units or statistics on a spreadsheet. They are little boys and girls learning whether the world is safe, whether relationships can be trusted, whether they are worthy of love, and whether they have the courage to face what life will eventually place before them. Surely those children deserve our most thoughtful consideration, our best science, and our willingness to ask difficult questions without losing our compassion for the people involved.

And that brings me back to the beautiful teaching of Jesus in Matthew 7:24–27, where He describes two men building their houses. One builds upon solid rock, while the other builds upon sand. Both houses face the same storms. The rains descend, the winds blow, and the waters rise. But only the house built upon rock remains standing.

I have always loved that teaching, and the longer I have worked with children and families, the more meaningful that image has become. Jesus was speaking about the importance of hearing and putting His words into practice, but the image also offers a powerful illustration of what we hope to accomplish when we nurture resilience in children. The wise man did not wait until the storm arrived to begin thinking about his foundation. He built upon the rock long before the rains descended and the winds began to blow. Is that not precisely what we are called to do for our children?

We cannot promise our sons and daughters a life free of hardship. There will be disappointments, losses, betrayals, and seasons when the winds of life blow with a ferocity none of us could have anticipated. I have lived long enough to know that those storms are not hypothetical. They come to every family, including the most loving and devoted among us.

But what a gift it is when a child has been given a strong foundation upon which to stand.

That foundation is formed through countless moments that may seem almost insignificant at the time. A mother's comforting embrace. A father's reassuring hand. A bedtime conversation. A shared laugh. A gentle correction. The courage to apologize after losing our patience. The simple act of setting aside our distractions and letting a child know, through our eyes and our attention, *You matter to me. I am glad you are here.*

Through the steady presence of loving mothers and fathers, through attunement, encouragement, discipline, forgiveness, and faithful love, we help lay something solid beneath our children's feet. That is where resilience begins—not when the storm arrives, but in the countless ordinary moments that come before it.

**The Developing Brain Does Not Read Our Slogans**  
*-Jeffrey E. Hansen, Ph.D.*

And for those children whose family circumstances are less than ideal, let us never forget that foundations can be strengthened and relationships can be repaired. A loving grandparent, an attentive teacher, a devoted adoptive parent, or another trustworthy adult can become an extraordinary source of stability and hope. Human development is not a story written once and sealed forever. There is room for healing, growth, and redemption.

That, to me, is one of the most hopeful messages emerging from developmental neuroscience. Our relationships matter profoundly, and the love we offer can leave an imprint that reaches far beyond the moments in which it is given.

So, to you mothers and fathers, and to everyone entrusted with the care of a child, I would simply say this: cherish the privilege. Be present when you can. Be gentle with yourselves when you fall short. Repair what you can, celebrate the small victories, and never underestimate the power of your ordinary faithfulness. You may never fully know how much your love is shaping the life unfolding before you.

And to those of us who study children, write policies about them, or make decisions that affect their families, may we have the wisdom to remain humble, the courage to pursue truth, and the compassion to remember what is ultimately at stake.

One day, the little child reaching for your hand will step out into a world that is breathtakingly beautiful and, at times, terribly difficult. You will not be able to walk every mile beside them or shield them from every storm. But perhaps, through the love, security, encouragement, and resilience you helped nurture, they will discover that they have something solid beneath their feet.

And when the winds begin to blow, may they find that they have been given a foundation strong enough to stand upon.

**The developing brain does not read our slogans. It reads our faces, hears our voices, and experiences our love. Let us give our children something beautiful upon which to build their lives.**

## References

- Abraham, E., Hendler, T., Shapira-Lichter, I., Kanat-Maymon, Y., Zagoory-Sharon, O., & Feldman, R. (2014). Father's brain is sensitive to childcare experiences. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 111(27), 9792–9797. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1402569111>
- Allen, D. W. (2013). High school graduation rates among children of same-sex households. *Review of Economics of the Household*, 11(4), 635–658. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11150-013-9220-y>
- Grossmann, K., Grossmann, K. E., Fremmer-Bombik, E., Kindler, H., Scheuerer-Englisch, H., & Zimmermann, P. (2002). The uniqueness of the child–father attachment relationship: Fathers' sensitive and challenging play as a pivotal variable in a 16-year longitudinal study. *Social Development*, 11(3), 301–337. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9507.00202>
- Mazrekaj, D., De Witte, K., & Cabus, S. (2020). School outcomes of children raised by same-sex parents: Evidence from administrative panel data. *American Sociological Review*, 85(5), 830–856. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122420957249>
- Paquette, D. (2004). Theorizing the father-child relationship: Mechanisms and developmental outcomes. *Human Development*, 47(4), 193–219. <https://doi.org/10.1159/000078723>
- Porges, S. W. (2011). *The polyvagal theory: Neurophysiological foundations of emotions, attachment, communication, and self-regulation*. W. W. Norton & Company. <https://wwwnorton.co.uk/books/9780393707007-the-polyvagal-theory>
- Sarkadi, A., Kristiansson, R., Oberklaid, F., & Bremberg, S. (2008). Fathers' involvement and children's developmental outcomes: A systematic review of longitudinal studies. *Acta Paediatrica*, 97(2), 153–158. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1651-2227.2007.00572.x>
- Schore, A. N. (1994). *Affect regulation and the origin of the self: The neurobiology of emotional development*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. <https://www.routledge.com/p/book/9781138917071>
- Schore, A. N. (2001). Effects of a secure attachment relationship on right brain development, affect regulation, and infant mental health. *Infant Mental Health Journal*, 22(1–2), 7–66. <https://allanschore.com/pdf/SchoreIMHJAttachment.pdf>
- Schore, A. N. (2003). *Affect dysregulation and disorders of the self*. W. W. Norton & Company. <https://wwwnorton.co.uk/books/9780393704068-affect-dysregulation-and-disorders-of-the-self>
- Schore, A. N. (2017). All our sons: The developmental neurobiology and neuroendocrinology of boys at risk. *Infant Mental Health Journal*, 38(1), 15–52. <https://doi.org/10.1002/imhj.21616>
- Schore, A., & McIntosh, J. (2011). Family law and the neuroscience of attachment, Part I. *Family Court Review*, 49(3), 501–512. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1744-1617.2011.01387.x>

Siegel, D. J. (2012). *The developing mind: How relationships and the brain interact to shape who we are* (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.

[https://books.google.com/books/about/The\\_Developing\\_Mind\\_Second\\_Edition.html?id=IF-BA\\_cdEOOC](https://books.google.com/books/about/The_Developing_Mind_Second_Edition.html?id=IF-BA_cdEOOC)

Sullins, D. P. (2015). Emotional problems among children with same-sex parents: Difference by definition. *British Journal of Education, Society & Behavioural Science*, 7(2), 99–120.

<https://doi.org/10.9734/BJESBS/2015/15823>

Sullins, D. P. (2017). Sample errors call into question conclusions regarding same-sex married parents: A comment on “Family structure and child health: Does the sex composition of parents matter?” *Demography*, 54(6), 2375–2383. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13524-017-0616-9>

Zhang, Y., Huang, H., Wang, M., Zhu, J., Tan, S., Tian, W., Mo, J., Jiang, L., Mo, J., Pan, W., & Ning, C. (2023). Family outcome disparities between sexual minority and heterosexual families: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *BMJ Global Health*, 8(3), Article e010556.

<https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjgh-2022-010556>